

Elizabeth McKune, EdD — Health Psychologist

IN THE THICK OF IT

After more than a decade-long career working in the Kentucky state correctional system helping inmates prepare for life after prison, psychologist Elizabeth McKune, EdD, was ready to play an even larger role in integrated health care.

She joined Passport Health Plan, a community-based health plan administering Kentucky Medicaid benefits, to help the organization and its beneficiaries navigate the changes brought on by the Affordable Care Act (ACA).

"While I had been working to build partnerships between the state and communities in my role with the Department of Corrections, Kentucky began using managed care for their Medicaid services," says McKune. "At Passport, it seemed there was a greater opportunity to help reshape the state's health care system under ACA."

McKune applies her training as a psychologist in her role as director of behavioral health at Passport. In this position, she identifies problems in the health care system, such as gaps in care among specific populations; proposes evidence-based solutions; measures outcomes; and makes decisions that affect how people in the state receive health care.

"It's fast paced and exciting with all of the changes taking place in health care right now," says McKune. "It's rewarding to be part of a system that is trying to figure out how to improve the health of Kentucky residents."

A FOCUS ON WOMEN

When she worked at the Kentucky state correctional system, McKune created a program that prepares women for life after prison, which includes housing and employment needs, health checkups and mental health services — especially important among women who are trauma survivors.

"We know from the literature that 90 percent of women in prison have had some sort of trauma exposure in their past," says McKune. She also worked to ensure female inmates had access to their own treatment unit specializing in both substance abuse and mental health problems. According to McKune, more than 50 percent of the women in the Kentucky state correctional system were treated for a mental health disorder and about 90 percent for some sort of substance use disorder.

In her role at Passport, McKune continues to focus on women — she helps Kentucky women who are at risk for substance abuse during pregnancy get the care and support they need.

"We are developing pilot programs that explore services on a care continuum," says McKune. "We also look at integrated health care and how we can improve the physical health of those who have severe mental illness. I measure the outcomes for alternative types of care to figure out if they help patients get any better. Integrated health care is my passion."

DIRECTIONS FOR HEALTH CARE POLICY

McKune says that many people may not know how far-reaching the science of psychology truly is. Helping to solve problems on an individual level is tremendously gratifying, but psychologists' research and the application of that research can have an impact on larger populations as well.

In graduate school "we learn to identify and articulate problems and put them in a format so we can measure outcomes. Now, I'm applying those approaches to make informed decisions about new health care policies," says McKune.



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HEALTH PSYCHOLOGY

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